

Breath Flows Hotter Than Magma

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Mako decides to learn to play an instrument and Nonon does her best to teach her some basics.

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Nonon puts her fist against Mako's upper belly as she stands behind her, pressing just firmly enough that she can feel her diaphragm and lungs responding to the pressure. Mako fidgets in her embrace, grinning widely.

"You really need to work on breathing all the way down here," Nonon says. "Especially if you're going to insist on your first instrument being a baritone saxophone."

"But just look at it! It's so friendly looking!" Mako says around the reed sticking halfway out of her mouth. "You made it sound so welcoming!"

Among the many instruments carefully stored within Nonon's studio and pulled out before her when she expressed an interest in learning, Mako had fallen head over heels in love with the giant curving thing. It hadn't occurred to her the amount of air she would need to move through it to get the sound it needed, nor did the possible weight of it concern her. When Nonon put on the harness for it, this thing that was almost as tall as she is, and screwed the reed in just so to the mouth piece, and demonstrated it for her, Mako felt her infatuation for it growing until the sound of it made her heart bloom with the resonance of it.

It had captured her and that was it. Nonon couldn't persuade her to the more reasonably sized alto or tenor saxophones, nor to a clarinet. Mako had wanted the bari more than breath itself, so Nonon had relented with a tired smirk.

The present Nonon affixes the bari to the harness around Mako's chest and shoulders, a more devious smirk playing across her lips, and Mako feels it weighing her down like a stone. She almost knocks her nose into the mouthpiece, but catches it before the impact could

split the thinnest part of the reed, which is what happened last weekend, the last time she and Ryuko visited Nonon and Satsuki.

"Careful with that," says Nonon. She returns to Mako's back, her arms wrapping around her again with the pinkie side of her fist pressed against her belly and her other hand on her shoulder. With a sigh, Mako melts into the embrace this time, straightening up only when Nonon squeezes her spine straight. Just as Mako intended. Reverse sneak hug. "Now, breathe. Not with your shoulders like a gasp, but way down here."

Mako nods and starts taking in a breath, only to have Nonon's hand clamp down on her shoulder.

"Oops," she giggled.

"Think of it like filling a pitcher of water. The water doesn't pool near the top of the pitcher, does it?"

Mako shakes her head. "That'd be weird."

"Try again."

Mako closes her eyes, concentrating hard on expanding the muscles underneath Nonon's fist and willing her shoulders to stay still. But try as she might, Nonon's hand clamping down on her shoulder tells her she's still doing it wrong.

"I'm trying, I'm trying!" cries Mako, the frustration bursting out of her before she could rein it in. "I just don't get it!"

To her relief, Nonon hides her frustration if she feels it, instead lost in thought as she steps away.

"Would it help if I demonstrated for you?" she asks eventually. "It might be hard to understand if you don't know what it feels like in motion."

Mako nods eagerly. She doesn't know quite how it happened, but she had come to enjoy Nonon's demeanor as she taught her music. She is softer in this mode, more understanding, less inclined to give Mako one of her characteristic doses of venom. Not that Mako hasn't built up a bit of an immunity at this point as they've gotten to know each other, but Nonon's kindnesses are addictive. Her mouth is soft when the fangs aren't out, her tongue flicking feather-light.

With a soft sigh that she undoubtedly intended to sound long-suffering, Nonon steps in front of Mako and backs into her after unhooking the bari from her once again. She reaches back and guides Mako's left hand to drape over her shoulder, and her right to make a fist in the same place she had put hers on Mako.

"Don't get any ideas," Nonon says over her shoulder. Her tone is only playfully vicious and makes Mako erupt into giggles as it draws up memories of the last time Mako got the kind of ideas Nonon is warning against. "Now, this is what it feels like to fill up your lungs from bottom to top."

Mako presses her hand into Nonon's belly as she begins to inhale. As she feels the slow expansion of her lungs, her shoulders lacking the hitch that had characterized Mako's attempts at a deep breath, Mako feels it click in her brain. She has witnessed this kind of breathing a lot without even realizing it. Watching Nonon or Satsuki sleeping in the middle of the night after coming back with a glass of water, resting her head on one of their bellies as they sat on the couch (she had always been more enamored with the inner sounds of their bodies in these moments, not the specific technique of their breathing), feeling them breathe in an embrace. Even Ryuko breathed in this way sometimes whenever Senketsu told her to try to calm down.

"It gets to be something you do without thinking, and the difference can be pretty subtle," says Nonon as she exhaled long and slow and controlled.

"Wow."

"With the set of lungs you have, I know that you can power this big thing eventually, maybe even with the grace of one of jazz's greatest."

"You think?"

"You've surprised me in the past, I don't see why I can't be generous with my predictions now." As she says this, she pulls away, replacing herself with the weight of the baritone sax. "I should make you practice your breathing without this on, but I want to punish you a little for having such huge ambitions right off the bat."

"Having big ambitions is better than being an underachiever though, Nonon-chan!"

"Miles better, yes, but if you lose motivation I'll just have to be tougher on you until you decide to cheer for yourself again." Her eyes flick between Mako and the mouthpiece. "You know, give it a go with a normal breath to see how it feels."

"Like a before and after comparison shot in a magazine, right?"

"Yes exactly. I think illustrating the dif-"

Mako already has her mouth on the mouthpiece and inhales like she's about to call Mataro and Guts in for dinner and blows like Nonon's showed her how on other nights just like this one. The sound is nothing like what Nonon's pulled out of it, and almost immediately her lungs bottom out as the bari sucks up all the air in her greedily, hungry for the life that playing gives it.

"Wow," Mako says again, "Wow, that's a lot of air it needs to breathe!"

"You see why I kept suggesting smaller saxes?"

"Mhmm! Let's try it with the breathing you showed me then!"

That makes Nonon smile with a softness that actually reaches her eyes, then she's behind her again, hands in their usual places.

"You've been to the ironworks right?" Nonon says, her tone suggesting that she just thought of something.

"Oh! Yes I have! Ira is very proud of it and his work there, as he should be!"

"So you know what bellows are?"

Mako nods vigorously.

"Pretend your lungs are bellows, then. That's a way better way of thinking of it."

It is, Mako thinks, and does as she's asked, imagining her lungs as a pair of the soot-caked bellows she saw when Ira gave her a tour some months ago. This time, Nonon's hand didn't clamp down on her shoulder. She inhales, and pretends the bari is blackened steel, the innards of it glowing red hot under the keys and within the bell. On a whim, she tucks the mouthpiece into her mouth. She exhales, and as a deep, rattling sound erupts from the instrument, she instead envisions the sound as great gouts of white hot flames leaping from the bell, the bell reddening, then yellowing as the heat of it builds. She distantly hears Nonon laugh in surprise and beyond that the sound of ceramic clattering onto linoleum from down the hall of the apartment. Then, the sound ends with a silly honk-ish sound as her lungs give out again.

"Did you hear that!?" she says before she even manages to get a full breath again.

"That was already way better than the first one," Nonon agrees. She looks so pleased for her that Mako feels her heart lighting up like beacon, like fireworks and she can't help but think that this might be the first time her affection for Nonon has ever been as bright as it is for the sisters or Senketsu. Nonon has such a pretty smile. It's really

no wonder that she has the admirers that she does. "Just think, in a couple months you'll look back on tonight and think, 'what a small thing that was, look at me now.'"

"What if I think like that every night?"

"I mean, if you're not going to get tired of it, I can't really stop you from doing it, even if I'd like to. Just don't get annoying about it, for the sake of my sanity."

"Every night I'll get better and better and better, even if it feels like I'm going nowhere fast, so I should celebrate it with everything I've got. One day, Mankanshoku Mako will be the sax man."

There's a long pause as Mako smiles at Nonon. Nonon's hands press together against her own lips, her thoughts loud and confused as they play across her face.

"Which one?" asks Nonon.

Before Mako can answer, the door to Nonon's studio swings open a little and Ryuko peaks in, looking almost as concerned as the t-shirt form Senketsu decided to take.

"That was just you guys, right? Not an earthquake or anything like that?" she asks.

"That was the power of my lungs!" says Mako. "Thanks to Nonon-chan."

Nonon smiles again at that, and Mako melts a little to see it. The fact that Ryuko smiles at that as well is enough to make Mako overflow with pride.

"The power of your lungs convinced a few plates to jump off their shelves," says Senketsu with amusement. "Is that the usual way that instrument works?"

"No, no," says Nonon, "That's just how newbies are, taking new steps with gusto and no sense of tune whatsoever, the fools."

Mako balks. "You can't be a fool if you're giving something your all! How can you get better anything if you go at it without everything you've got!? You can't, you can't, you can't!"

As Mako puts the mouthpiece to her mouth, she vaguely hears Satsuki calling from the kitchen that all the pieces of the plates were all cleaned up. And as she inhales from deep in her guts, she hears Senketsu say 'oh no' and the sound of Ryuko's feet pounding on the hardwood as she ran back down the hallway. And as she imagines the rumble of tuneless sound back into an even bigger jet of flame, she hears more plates crashing in the kitchen, two bodies and a kamui smack against linoleum, and the sound of Nonon's high laugh lilting with pride.